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RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 5993
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 3687
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 3546
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 4235
RHMCSUU/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 001604

SIPDIS

STATE FOR SCA/CEN

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [ASEC](#) [TX](#)

SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: NO HONKING (OR NEW WOMEN DRIVERS)!

Classified By: Charge Sylvia Reed Curran for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: The streets of Ashgabat are not the safest roads to drive on. However, new regulations seem more aimed at pleasing a whim of the President or due to gender prejudice than promoting public safety. President Berdimuhamedov has mandated that Ashgabat be a "car horn honking free zone." Due to the President's interest in the issue, it is nearly impossible for the police to return the seized licenses of drivers who honk their horns. Incompetence in maintaining the traffic cordon for the President's motorcade resulted in the Police Chief of Ashgabat being fired. Locals have noted that it has become increasingly difficult for women to pass drivers' exams and that women acquaintances have been losing their license for minor or made-up driving infractions. Police have told them this is part of a new policy to advance public safety by reducing the number of women drivers on the road. Given that women constitute a small percentage of Turkmenistan's motor vehicle operators and are more likely to have passed the exam (rather than pay bribes) to get their licenses than men, we strongly doubt that concerns for public safety are behind efforts to reduce their numbers. END SUMMARY.

NO HONKING!

12. (C) Turkmenistan is not the safest place to drive, but sometimes new traffic regulations have little to do with the promotion of general public safety. The Deputy Chief of the Traffic Police (protect) informed Embassy staff that President Berdimuhamedov has mandated that the city of Ashgabat be a "no car horn honking" zone. Two weeks ago, we noticed that "No honking" traffic signs were posted throughout the city center. The President also mandated that the traffic police strictly enforce the "no honking" regulation within city limits. (NOTE: There is often a gap between regulations/laws and implementation in Turkmenistan. END NOTE.)

13. (C) The normal fine for traffic infractions is 10 manat (approximately \$3.00) However, the Deputy Chief of the Traffic Police currently has in his desk 600 seized drivers' licenses from those who violated the no honking rule. The Deputy chief was told not to return those licenses, because the Minister of the Interior has a keen interest in these

cases. The Deputy Chief also told us that he is able to return licenses to drunk drivers or hit and run drivers in exchange for a bribe, but he can't return the no honking violators' licenses, because the President is interested. The Deputy Chief told the Embassy staff member that he is tired of the "circus" at his work.

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE TRAFFIC CORDON?

¶4. (C) The Prosecutor for Ahal province (protect) told us that a vehicle slipped past two police officers blocking streets for the presidential motorcade and tried to hit the motorcade. One of the presidential security vehicles (a VW Toureg) rammed the suspect car before it could hit the motorcade. According to the prosecutor, the driver of the car had a long criminal record and claimed he was currently taking prescription medication. Since this incident, officials have been tasked with going into every pharmacy in Ashgabat to find this drug. (NOTE: The prosecutor did not want to divulge the name of the medication, which is now considered "sensitive." END NOTE.)

¶5. (C) As a result of the incident with the motorcade. The President fired Ashgabat Police chief Adbdy Antaniyazov and the two traffic officers who let the vehicle get close to the motorcade. There is now increased police presence on the street during the evening rush hour, and streets are blocked off much earlier before the President departs the city center.

NO NEW WOMEN DRIVERS

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¶6. (C) Local staff at the Embassy have noted that it has become more difficult for female Turkmen to obtain and retain driver's licenses. They were able to recount several instances of female family members, friends, and colleagues being unable to obtain driver's licenses or whose licenses have been recently suspended for seemingly minor or made-up infractions. This appears to be a recent development as women previously faced no serious obstacles (beyond the standard corruption all Turkmen encounter) during testing or in subsequent interactions with road police. One staff member whose cousin is the head of the traffic police in a northern city warned her that police would be extra vigilant with female drivers, as an order had been passed down to reduce the number of women on the road.

¶7. (C) Another employee with relatives who work for the government offered that the police leadership has become convinced that a steady rise in traffic accidents is being caused by a simultaneous rise in the number of female drivers. Over the past several years, Ashgabat has experienced a tremendous growth in vehicles on its streets. The pervasive corruption that allows nearly any male driver to simply purchase a driver's license by bribing officials has made driving in the city hazardous.

¶8. (C) COMMENT: One of the positive legacies of Soviet times was gender equality enshrined in law, even though this equality was often more de jure than de facto. It would be a shame if even this is being eroded. Given that women constitute a small percentage of Turkmenistan's motor vehicle operators and are more likely to have passed the exam to get their licenses than men, we strongly doubt that concerns for public safety are behind efforts to reduce their numbers. END COMMENT.
CURRAN